

# Festival Report: 18th International Festival Signs of the Night – Berlin (6th Edition): 16th-20th September 2020

[kamera.co.uk/18th-international-festival-signs-of-the-night-berlin-6th-edition-16th-20th-september-2020](https://kamera.co.uk/18th-international-festival-signs-of-the-night-berlin-6th-edition-16th-20th-september-2020)

Steven Yates

15 December 2020



The 2020 Signs of the Night Film Festival (Signes de Nuit) took place in Berlin at the Kino in der Königstadt between 16th-20th September, the eighteenth festival and the sixth time the festival has taken place in Berlin. It was a rich and varied festival which addressed important and urgent issues in the world, mainly about oppression. The film programme ranged from topics such as: capitalism and survival, queers and self-identification, homelessness, returning to Tibet, women and Arabic culture, androgyny, kidnapping, power abuse, Palestine and poverty, cosmic feelings, emotion and artificial intelligence, homelessness and taste, and even nuclear trash in Taiwan.

This worldwide panorama of films was divided into Short Film and Documentary Programmes, with a jury for both and numerous prize categories, therefore giving an opportunity to win for each of the many films that were screened. As well as these competition sections, there were additional special focus programs on short films from the Balkans and Germany. The festival also had Premieres galore with films seen in Berlin for the first time that ranged from: World Premiere, International Premiere, European Premiere, German Premiere and Berlin Premiere.

The quality of the programme was excellent and near enough every film resonated or captivated audiences with its originality. Like many festivals and events this year, unfortunately the festival attendance was hampered by the on-going Covid-19 pandemic. The Shorts programme dominated the first three days of the festival with the Documentaries following in the final two days.

There was also a bigger challenge in giving prizes because there were so many great films to choose from. However, some did stand out and it was fortunate that they were considered in separate categories so that they could have a better chance of winning an

award, or at least attaining a special mention, with only a couple being so unfortunate as to miss an award this time. In all, there were five main awards and seven honourable mentions.

## **MAIN AWARD**

The Main Award went to the Argentinian film *Electric Swan*, directed by Greek native Konstantina Kotzamani. This 40-minute film was chosen as the winner because of its original and engaging depiction of people living in a tower block and how their disparate lives intertwine. It was also accolade the highest prize due to its innovative and surrealist format that seamlessly brings the legend of Swan Lake into modern city living. These otherwise perceptively disparate narrative elements combine and integrate compellingly, all seen through the eyes of a central protagonist, a quiet and unassuming security guard.

### Honourable mentions

The first honourable mention went to the Algeria-France co-production *Touiza* by Karim Bengana. It was deserving of a mention because of the performances of the two leads and the way it builds up tension and suspense while still offering a surprise with its denouement. In this way it becomes a revisionist character study, both in terms of the main narrative and the back story. The mystery and motivation of the main protagonist endures long after the credits roll.

The Palestinian film *The Present* by Farah Nabulsi was a film that was also highly commended, not least for a strong performance from a child actor. More than this it depicts in candid detail a day in the life of a Palestinian family suffering from the consequences of the wall that runs along the West Bank and the humiliation and intimidation that is suffered in order fulfil basic civil liberties like shopping.

## **SIGNS AWARD (PRIX DE SIGNES)**

The Signs Award honours films which treat an important subject in an original and convincing way.

The winner, which was also a strong contender for best film in the whole festival competition, was *The Physics of Sorrow (Physique de la tristesse)*. A Canadian production, it was directed by Theodore Ushev and was chosen as the Signs Award winner because of its perfection in animation, editing and narration. A multi-layered film with an almost timeless quality, the lament for childhood from the perspective of later years, transported to another time and place, draws us in with an almost inexplicable and hypnotic beauty.

### Honourable mentions

*How to Disappear*, co-directed by Robin Klengel, Leonhard Müllner and Michael Stumpf, an Austrian production, was bestowed with an honourable mention because of its transient use of the popular online games medium to both educate and inform. Using a

voice-over with an essay-like narrative, a simulacrum is in play and asks the thought-provoking philosophical question of whether one can justifiably be a war deserter here in the same way as the physical world.

From China, *Splash* by Huang Weipeng was also deserving of an honourable mention because of its crafting of a four-part requiem to the elderly people of China that serves as a lament to times past and how the older generation are forgotten in a fast-changing world. The professional and compelling structure of this elegy strikes a chord in its artistic projection.

### **NIGHT AWARD (PRIX DE NUIT)**

The Night Award honours films which are able to balance ambiguity and complexity characterized by enigmatic mysteriousness and subtleness, which keeps mind and consideration moving.

The winner was *Babydyke* by Tone Otilie from Denmark which stood out because of its depiction of a young lesbian community with understanding and defiance. Along with fine performances by the all-female cast, it is also commendable for individual resolve in the face of torment and personal torture. The close-up photography with hand-held cameras serves in its purpose of ensuring that this sub-world is both claustrophobic and hypnotic.

#### **Honourable Mentions**

*Abisal* by Esteban Santana from Chile was given an honourable mention because of its existential portrait of a faded poet who has lost the will to partake in society as he submerges in the depths of a Chilean seaport. The acting and atmosphere make for a unique portrayal of a city and those of its residents who are otherwise inconspicuous within its ruined streets.

The Japanese film *Sewing Box for My Daughter* by Kieko Ikehata deserved its honourable mention because of how it depicts a contemporary Japanese society that is still bound up with its traditional but oppressive ways. Two women answer questions of how they brought up their daughters and it soon becomes clear that it is the only possibility for them to have a second chance at reliving their own childhood by going down a different path, of dreaming another life.

### **EDWARD SNOWDEN AWARD**

The Edward Snowden Award honours films which offer sensitive (and mostly) unknown information, facts and phenomena of eminent importance, for which the festival wishes a wide proliferation in the future.

*Bo Choy's War of Perception* was the outstanding winner of the Edward Snowden Award because of its depiction of a journey through past and present Hong Kong in the form of a spirit and reflection. The spirit serves as the personification of a city that still lives with unresolved tensions from its colonial past and how it transposes to the present. This is

depicted through archive footage of the director who has long since left Hong Kong, juxtaposed with the present cityscape, therefore representing familiarity combined with the status of an outsider.

#### Honourable Mention

The Afghanistan production *Roqia* by Diana Saqeb Jamal deserved an honourable mention because of the way it depicts war and atrocity through the eyes of a 12-year-old girl and the traumatic effects this causes that are rarely addressed. The media frenzy caused by a suicide bombing neglects the effect it has on the young, but *Roqia* fully accounts for this void as the central character delivers a mature and compelling performance.

#### **SPECIAL JURY AWARD**

In the International Festival Signs of the Night festival every international jury can declare one Special Award for a special aspect or capacity of a film.

The Special Jury Award was won by South Korean director Haeseong Jeong for his film *Accompany* because of its depiction of personal torture leading to erratic behaviour caused by wider society and how one man redeems himself through the innocence of a young girl. With fast narrative pacing and variables, it was elevated to winner by strong performances, particularly the young child actor in a memorable non-speaking role.